

# Midnight Rendezvous

by erenjaegers

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Summary: Minamoto Ayako belongs to one of Japan's largest noble families. Unsatisfied with her life and wanting to avoid an arranged marriage, she decides to run away with her forbidden lover, Okita Souji, and start over as a member of the Shinsengumi... and as Souji's cousin. What she has yet to realize is life won't be as simple as she thinks... (Souji x OC, Slight Yamazaki x OC)

## 1. Reminisce

(Author's Note: I love Hakuouki and it's characters so I couldn't help but write this. Consider the time setting as some time after the Roshigumi became known as the Shinsengumi!)

\* \* \*

><p>"Goodnight," I bowed my head respectfully as I headed to my room.<p>

Mother, Father, and my older brother nodded their heads, hardly paying me any heed as I left the room, sliding the door open and closed. They were in the midst of discussing my marriage plans and had found two potential candidates - the youngest son of the Taira family and the middle son of the Takahashi family.

I had met Taira Akagi once before, about a year ago. He wasn't bad-looking, but he was a sweaty, nervous mommy's boy who didn't know how to fold his own clothes. Takahashi Satoshi I had only caught a glimpse of - he was bulky and heavy, and drank alcohol as if it were water. He was seventeen years older than I and had not found a wide, in spite of being nearly forty years old.

I had no intentions of ever marrying either of them.

After walking down the hallway and turning a corner, I reached my own bedroom, sliding open my door and entering the darkness. Fumbling

around until I could light the lamp by the window, I let down my hair and began to make my bed. I could hear footsteps approaching from down the hallway, the door sliding open as my mother stuck her head inside.

"Going to sleep so early, Ayako?" Mother asked suspiciously.

I smiled, nodding my head. "Brother and I woke up early this morning to visit the temple in the mountains," I reminded her. She seemed to accept my response, because as I climbed into bed, she closed the door without another word, leaving me to myself. I blew out the lamp, lying down on my bed and listening to the sound of footsteps in the corridor. My brother settled down in his room across from me, and I could hear my parents talking as they moved down the hall towards their own rooms. Then, silence.

After remaining in the dark for another ten minutes, the house having gone completely silent, I carefully shifted, wiggling out from underneath my blanket and groping around for the pillows I kept hidden underneath my floorboards. I pulled them out and tucked them under the blanket where my body would usually be, then slid the board back where it belonged. I tiptoed towards the window, and after making sure to check if everyone had truly gone to bed, I snuck out the window, putting on my slippers and stealing away.

Following the light of the moon, I rounded my family estate, sneaking past the guard who had fallen asleep underneath the cherry blossom tree and taking my usual route across the stones in the pond and heading into the forest. After I ventured out for five minutes, I reached the old storage shack my family had used during times of war, delighted to see that the door had been left ajar. Making sure nobody had tailed after me, I quietly pushed the door open, walking in and closing it behind me.

"You're here," a familiar voice said in the darkness. "A little earlier than usual, too. Did you want to see me that bad?"

I lit the lamp by the door, smiling as my beloved's face came into view. He had been leaning against the shelf that we had pushed against the window to hide the light emanating from the lamp, dressed in his casual clothing, his sword propped up on the wall beside him. I couldn't help but feel my heart skip a beat as I met his eyes, my face instantly feeling warm as he approached me, taking me in his arms.

"Everyone went to sleep early, it was the perfect opportunity," I answered as he gazed down at me. "I think my mom might be a little suspicious, though."

"Oh, really?" he asked as he pushed me against the wall, planting a kiss to my lips. I held onto his clothes, forcing him to stop. "What is it?"

"I think we might have to set up a different time to meet," I stated. "I'm worried my parents are going to find out. They want me to get married, you know. They're keeping a tighter leash on me now."

"Married?"

"Yeah," I reluctantly admitted. "They've even found two potential candidates for me to meet with this weekend."

He stepped back, returning to his spot by the shelf, sitting down and propping an elbow on his knee, resting his chin upon his hand.  
"Who?"

"Takahashi Satoshi and Taira Akagi," I said, watching as a grimace instantly came upon his features.

"That beer-bellied drunkard? And that mommy's boy? You're kidding with me, right?" he questioned in disbelief.

"I'm not, I was just sitting with them at dinner while they discussed it in front of my face, like my opinion didn't matter," I remarked, letting out a dejected sigh. "Souji, I'm scared. I don't want to get married to either of them, or anyone else for that matter."

"I wouldn't either, if I were you," he joked, then seeing how I wasn't laughing, turned serious. "You can't avoid it? Or convince them otherwise?"

"Of course not!" I said. "You know I can't do a thing about it. Sometimes... sometimes I wish I weren't born, so I wouldn't have to deal with all of this. I'd be better off dead or living off as a farm girl, at least then I'd be able to have some freedom and a mind for my own. Maybe I should just--"

"Don't say that," Souji scolded me, grabbing me by my hand and sitting me down. "Don't you dare say it."

"\_Souji\_..." I mumbled as he glared at me, releasing my wrist and crossing his arms over his chest.

It got quiet as he thought it over. "Maybe you should run away with me. That way, you don't have to marry the fatass or that useless rich boy," he suddenly suggested, grinning at me. "Sounds exciting, doesn't it?"

"This isn't a joke," I replied, a bit ticked off by his teasing. "I can't just leave my family so easily. You've seen what they're capable of. If I run off with you, they'll hunt us down and kill us both for shaming the family."

"They don't have to know you ran," Souji spoke. "We could always pretend to kidnap you. You can't be blamed if you're kidnapped, right?"

"You're crazy," I berated him. "We'll get figured out, I know it. Besides, you're part of the Shinsengumi. You can't leave. And I know you wouldn't, anyway. You love Kondou too much to run off with me."

My secret lover, Okita Souji, had been born to a samurai family and lost his parents early on in his childhood, long before he and I even met. His older sister was forced to care for him until ultimately dropping him off at a dojo, where Isami Kondou, now Commander of the infamous Shinsengumi, took him under his wing, providing him with a roof to live under, a bed to sleep in, and food to eat. Kondou treated Souji as if he were his own family, protecting him from the

bullying of the other children and showing Souji that kindness still existed in the world.

Unable to deny my words, Souji merely laughed, leaning forward and changing the subject. "Ayako-chan, your hair is down."

"Oh, you noticed."

"How could I not?"

I laughed quietly, toying with my hair as I smiled up at him. "You didn't notice it last week. I had down then, too."

"Yeah, I know. I just didn't say anything," he replied, though I knew he was lying from the way his eyes wavered ever-so-slightly.

"Sure," I said, shaking my head as I stifled a giggle.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded. "Hey, Ayako-chan."

"Nothing," I claimed. I could see a faint red tint ghosting his cheeks as he watched me laugh at him, unaccustomed to being teased. Usually, he would be the one to playfully poke fun at me, yet this time, I couldn't help but do the same to him.

The atmosphere seemed to lift after a while, gradually shifting from a tense mood to a more casual one. As I leaned against his shoulder, his arms holding me close to him, he updated me on what had transpired within the Shinsengumi in the time we had been apart. I was always fascinated by the stories he would tell me, finding myself wrapped up in his tales of failure and redemption. The Shinsengumi, though originally formed to keep peace and order, had a bad reputation around this side of country. They were labeled as rogues who would willingly sacrifice the lives of their comrades without hesitating for even a second. They were said to slaughter innocent civilians, then rob them of their money and belongings.

I knew they were all lies. I had run into the Shinsengumi once before.

Three years ago, when they were still called the Roshigumi, they had saved my life. I had been in the marketplace with one of my cousins when I had gotten separated from her in the crowd and was pulled into an alleyway, where enemies of my father attempted to kidnap me, knowing that doing so would force my family to pay the ransom they anticipated on receiving.

Having observed my older brother learning how to fight as a child, I mimicked the moves I had so keenly watched, adhering to my knowledge of pressure points and attempting to free myself. I managed to get myself out from one of the kidnappers grasps, but another man had grabbed me, threatening to cut me if I put up a fight. When all seemed to be over, I heard a blood-curdling scream and I was suddenly thrust away from the man, staggering over to a wall as I turned around in astonishment.

A young man dressed in a loose-fitting red top on top of a gray shirt and green hakama had come to my aid, having stabbed the man who had captured me with the end his sword. Even in the shade of the alley,

where the sunlight was obscured by the buildings, I found myself transfixed by the man's sheer beauty. He had reddish-brown hair and sparkling eyes that were more vibrant than the emerald brilliancy of the meadows in the springtime. Awe-struck, I watched as he skillfully killed the two men, swiping the sword to get the blood off of it before approaching me.

"Thank you," I breathed, bowing my head gratefully. I felt my head droop because of all of the accessories that were piled into my hair, the man casually lifting my head up, his sleek fingers tilting my chin up so he could peer into my face. Intimidated and bashful under his intense stare, I avoided looking into his eyes, relief washing over me as soon as he pulled away, smirking.

"What's your name, girl?" he inquired.

"Minamoto Ayako," I answered.

"Ayako, huh? How old are you?"

I was puzzled at his line of questioning but I didn't hesitate to answer. "I'm eighteen."

"I just turned twenty not long ago," the strange man answered. "For an eighteen-year-old, you're pretty short."

"Am \_not\_!" I claimed. "My cousin is your age and I'm taller than her. You're just saying that because you're tall."

"Hmph, you think so?" he asked, seeming to be mocking me.

Before I could respond, two other men appeared, swords at their sides as well. One was tall and carried a spear, with red hair, captivating golden eyes, and a gorgeous face. The other was tall as well, with a muscular build, glistening body, and short brown hair that made him look western. The two men stopped when they saw me, the boy who saved me glancing back at them.

"Sano, Shinpachi," the boy greeted.

Sano, the red-haired one, smiled kindly, approaching me and patting me on the head. "What a cute girl. How'd you find her, Souji?"

"She was about to be kidnapped by these guys here," Souji, my savior, spoke, motioning towards the two limp corpses. "I came in and killed them in a split second."

"Souji, you took off so suddenly, it worried even me," Shinpachi, the fit man, mused as he joined Sano. When he laid eyes on me, he cried out in delight. "You're so beautiful..."

Unaccustomed to such flattery, I could only laugh shyly. "Thank you."

"Souji, wanna take her home with us?" Shinpachi called turning back to me with a smile. "We're samurai from the Roshigumi. What's your name?"

"Minamoto Ayako," I introduced myself.

"Want to come back with us?" Shinpachi questioned. "I haven't seen such a pretty girl in ages."

"I can't. I'm supposed to be shopping with my cousin right now," I declined his request, feeling a bit uneasy with his enthusiasm. "Thank you once more for saving me, Souji-san."

He merely nodded as I scrambled off to the marketplace once more in search of my cousin, whom I found crying by the snacks cart. She was so scared of losing me that she began to tear up even more when she saw me, embracing me with all her might. I told her what had happened and she was absolutely mystified by my story.

Later on, when Mother and Father came to retrieve us, I had told them the same thing, yet instead of praising the Roshigumi for saving my life, they castigated me for being careless and getting myself captured, believing it was my own fault. Father called the Roshigumi '\_fakes\_' and '\_cheap excuses for samurai\_', not even recognizing that if it weren't for them, I would be gone and he would be forced to hand over money.

My cousin Kimiku noticed how crestfallen and hurt I was and tried to soothe me as our carriage bumped along the path back home. She was staying at our home for the month as my parents helped search for a husband for her, like they had been doing for me now. Kimiku was a sweet girl, though gullible and easy to deceive. She wasn't very bright but I loved her more than anyone else in my family. She genuinely cared for me and considered my feelings rather than treating me as if I were a possession.

A week after that incident, I was out shopping once more with Kimiku when we there was a commotion in the restaurant we were dining in. Apparently, angry civilians were causing a ruckus up at the front of the noodle shop and disturbing the peace. I was about to get up and see for myself when I heard the voices approaching us. My handsome savior from before, Souji, had entered with two unfamiliar men and had received rage-filled threats from a group of men who called them names and accused them of corruption.

Kimiku had noticed my surprise, because she had turned around and spotted the three handsome men taking a seat across from us. Instead of responding to the enraged bunch, the men calmly ordered their meals, Souji smiling up at the four accusing civilians.

"You can leave now, you're disturbing our meal," he spoke. "Do you want to be killed?"

"\_Souji\_," the man beside him scolded. He was beautiful, dressed in purple and gray, his dark locks gathered up on a ponytail. Souji laughed, though I could tell he was being serious about it.

"You bastards," a man growled. "Rogues of your kind don't belong here!"

"Murderers and mock samurai, that's what you are! Rot in hell!" another shouted.

"I hope they put poison in your food," the third snarled. "They'd be doing us a favor."

"You fakes really have some nerve to come out in the open like this and scaring the women and the children," the last man snapped. "I would kill you myself if I could."

Kimiku glanced at me, noting how irritated I was getting by the second. "Aya-chan, they're being awfully mean to those men."

I nodded my head, standing up. "Hey, you four," I spoke, grabbing their attention. "If you're not here to eat, please leave. You're frightening all of the customers."

"Huh?"

The crowded, small noodle shop was filled with customers, and they had all grown silent and fearful when the men began a ruckus. Seeing as I was right, they hesitated for a moment before the fourth man stormed over to me and yanked me by the hair, to his comrades' astonishment.

"H-\_hey\_, what are you doing? She's a noble!"

"Why are you hurting a woman?" another exclaimed, horrified. "Let's get out of here. She probably has bodyguards hiding somewhere."

The man's three friends made a run for the exit as he violently shook me, screaming at me as Kimiku backed away in terror. "You little \_bitch\_, are you defending them? You think you're so high and mighty because you're a noble? You spoiled little brats don't know what real work for us farmers is like! I'll teach you a lesson!"

Some villagers got up and ran, not even bothering to pay for their meal as they fled for safety. I refused to cry and scream in spite of all of the pain I was in, not wanting to give the man what he wanted. Suddenly the thrashing had stopped and the man released me, slumping over onto the ground by my feet, having been slashed down by Souji, who was grinning in amusement.

"He was too noisy," Souji laughed, wiping the blood from his face as the remaining customers made a run for it. Poor Kimiku had gotten so shaken up at the sight of all of the blood that she trembled like a scared dog as Souji scooted the body from my feet, the blood smearing on the ground as his two team members stared at him in disbelief.

"You didn't have to kill him," a stoic, purple-haired man spoke as he examined the body from where he sat.

"He was asking for it. He was harassing not only us, but a woman. He deserved it, don't you think? Besides, if she's a noble, any samurai in their right mind would have protected her," Souji said as he came over to me. "Minamoto Ayako, right? I remember you. You're always getting yourself into trouble, aren't you?"

I gazed up at him, meeting his stunning green eyes and finding that my heart was racing wildly in its confinement.

"Are you afraid of me, woman?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not."

"Even after I killed three men in front of you?" he inquired, almost smug at my fearlessness.

"I'm not scared of you."

He stared at me, transfixed, before placing his sword back in its sheath and walking towards the exit of the noodle shop. "Hijikata, Saitou, we should probably find somewhere else to eat."

"Right."

The two men glanced at me briefly before making their leave, Souji shooting me one last cynical smile before disappearing through the flap of the door. Kimiku had since recovered from her shock and stared at me with wide, bewildered eyes.

"Don't tell me it was that man who saved you last time," she said.

"It was," I affirmed, staring at the door he had just gone through. "Souji..."

Thinking back to the time we met, I couldn't help but smile. Staring up at him, I wrapped my arms around his firm body, kissing him on his lips. As Souji gently rubbed my shoulders, I continued to reminisce, fondly recalling the start of our story together.

After our first two meetings, I was completely smitten by him and desperately wanted to meet him once more. A month after the noodle shop incident, the Roshigumi were said to be camping out in the forest nearby my family's estate so I had ventured out in search of him in spite of the obvious dangers. Kimiku had since then gotten married, leaving me by myself and craving companionship. I wanted to see that mysterious man again and thank him for all that he had done for me.

The scouts had nearly attacked me when I had approached in the darkness, thinking I was an enemy, but when they realized I was looking for someone, they allowed me through, two of them escorting me to the base camp. I was surprised at how gentle and kind these men actually were in spite of their nasty reputation everywhere. As I passed through the camp, nobody tried to attack me and looked at me in utter shock.

The men brought me over to a group of men gathered around a fire, discussing strategies for an upcoming escort mission. When the men interrupted the meeting, they were scolded until I emerged from behind them, to everyone's disbelief.

"Y-you..." Souji said in recognition as I bowed respectfully to the group of samurai.

"She came looking for Okita-san. We couldn't turn her away," one of the men explained. The man I recognized as Hijikata gave me a hard stare, then reluctantly looked at Souji and nodded his head.

Okita Souji stood from his seat at the fire, walking past his stunned comrades and leading me away to a secluded area in the forest where we could talk. Crossing his arms over his chest, he had studied my



face, smirking when I backed away from him.

"So why did you come all the way out here to look for me, woman? You almost got yourself killed," he asked, amused.

"This past month, something was bothering me," I started, fumbling for the right words. "Ever since you protected me from that man at the noodle shop, I can't help but think back and realize that I never properly thanked you for saving me. Thank you."

As I bowed, Souji merely laughed. "I wasn't doing it for you. I was doing it because I wanted to and because he had it coming for him."

"Oh." I was slightly let down by his words, but nonetheless continued on. "In any case, I wanted to thank you for it. My family owns the estate not too far from here. If you need a place to stay, I'm sure there's enough room for all of the Roshigumi."

"Hm?" He now looked down at me in suspicion, narrowing his eyes at me. "We've camped out in the wilderness countless times. We're samurai. The cold doesn't faze us."

"Even so, I want to repay you for helping--"

I was suddenly slammed against the tree, Souji looming over me, his features even more majestic and refined under the milky light of the moon. My heart raced in my chest as he gazed down at me, his sheer gaze trapping me under his control.

"Tell me, woman, what you're really here for," he murmured, his voice deep and husky as he towered over me. "You didn't run from your house just to say thanks. What do you really want?"

My breath caught up in my throat, my eyes never leaving his even for a second. I hesitated then, wondering whether or not I should be truthful with him. Something inside me was urging me to tell the truth, so I mustered up all of my courage to honestly name what my intentions were.

"I... I want you," I confessed, surprising him. Initially taken aback, I watched as he eventually smirked, seeming to expect my answer.

"I'm surprised you said it," he admitted. "And so loudly, too. So you want me, huh?"

"I-It's not like that!" I blurted out in embarrassment. "My cousin just got married, and I was lonely, so..."

"Lonely at night?" Souji whispered in my ear, his hot breath causing something deep within me to stir. I gasped out in surprise when I felt something hot and wet run down the side of my ear and down my neck, Souji's tongue painting across my exposed skin. I shivered as a breeze glided over the wet trail, involuntarily leaning into him.

"Souji, wait!" I cried, stopping him before he could progress any further. "Not here."

"Hmph. So you do want me," he purred. "I've never had a girl want me like you do."

"B-be quiet," I stammered shyly. "Is there anywhere else we could go?"

"There's an abandoned storage shack five minutes from here," he said.

"That's on my family's property," I explained. "It was used to store weapons during the war times."

"I don't care for the little details," Souji stated, tugging my hand as he led me away.

The feeling of his hand holding mine so delicately gave me a sense of warmth that I had never even felt before. Souji acted ruthlessly, but he was kinder than he appeared, wasn't he? Even now, he had heeded to my suggestion and gently pulled me along to a more private location. I spotted the shack up ahead and felt my face heat up when I realized what was coming up for me.

Souji tugged me inside, instantly pushing me onto the ground and crawling on top of me, his gorgeous features accentuated by the light filtering in through the window behind me. I nervously backed away from him as he moved to kiss me, having never kissed a man in my life. He held the back of my head, pulling me towards him as his soft, warm lips pressed against my own, massaging them. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I melted beneath him, returning his feverish kisses with my uncertain, inexperienced ones.

"You've never done this before, have you?" he whispered against my lips, withdrawing to gaze into my eyes.

I shook my head. "No."

He ran his hands down my backside, pressing me into his body and smiling confidently at me. "I'll make sure that this is a memorable experience for you, then."

Back in the present, as I recalled this moment, Souji noticed how my face flushed and chuckled at me. "Ayako-chan, what are you thinking about?"

"About... how we met," I answered plainly. "Why?"

"Your face is all red," he commented. "Are you thinking about the first time we did it?"

Blushing furiously, I shook my head. "\_Idiot\_! Of course not!"

He merely grinned, patting my head affectionately. "You're cute, Ayako-chan. But not so loud, someone might hear you yelling at me."

We spent another two or three hours with one another, just talking, before I we parted ways. As usual, I had left a minute or two before he did, blowing out the lamp and stealing out into the woods. Souji did the same, bidding me goodbye with a smile. I sneaked all the way back home and crawled in through my window, relieved to see nothing

had changed since I had left. I had only been apart from him for ten minutes and I was already aching to see him again. Sighing, I fell asleep almost as soon as I had got under the covers.

## 2. Forbidden

Author's Note: Well, I changed the rating to M! This fic will contain violence and strong language and sexy scenes, so I thought it was safer if I labeled it this way. Enjoy! Just a warning, there is a sexy scene in this chapter! It comes after a break, so skip over the break in the chapter if you don't want to read it.

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning, we received a surprise visit from Kimiku, who had stopped by for the day with her husband, her belly protruding from underneath her kimono. She was six months pregnant and had gotten chubbier since I last saw her over three years ago. She immediately ran to hug me, squishing my face against her chest and crying in happiness. She had received news about my upcoming marriage interviews and had come to offer me advice and formally introduce me to her husband, Tsukiyama Shin, for the very first time. He was a kind man, with a gentle disposition and good-mannered. He treated Kimiku with respect and was a pleasure to have in the house.<p>

After he and my parents had gone out to tour the garden together, Kimiku excitedly sat me down in the tea room, handing me a cup of hot tea. I gratefully accepted it, forcing a smile knowing she had prepared some advice beforehand just for me. I didn't want to talk about marriage at all, much less about marriage to men I didn't even love. We chatted casually with one another and I purposely did all I could to avoid the topic. However, I knew it would only work for so long.

"I'm so excited for you!" Kimiku said, grabbing my hand. "Aren't you excited to finally get married? I remember when we were younger and we would talk about a day like this. I'm married and pregnant! I didn't expect to love Shin like I do now. I want you to have the same happiness."

I laughed. "I remember that, too. Back then, I used to believe in happy endings, but now..."

Kimiku was stunned by my words. "What? Ayako, what are you saying?"

"Kimiku, I don't want to get married to Taira or Takahashi," I confessed. "I'm in love with someone else."

Kimiku gaped at me. "Eh?! Are you serious? Who is it?"

I shook my head, not wanting to say. If she found out I was madly in love with a samurai, a member of the Shinsengumi at that, she would laugh at me. Not only that, I doubt she would understand why I loved him, seeing as she was right there to witness Souji killing a man a while back. If she found out Souji was the one I had been seeing for the past three years, she would think I was crazy, especially since I had not told a single soul about the forbidden relationship we had

been carrying out. If anyone were to find out, he would be killed. I had no doubt about it.

"Kimiku," I spoke, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to talk about getting married. You may be happy with Shin, but I know I could never be happy if I married someone who Mother and Father arranged me to."

"Aya-chan." Kimiku sympathetically laid a hand on mine, noting how pained I looked. "I didn't know you were in love. Is he a noble, too? Do I know him?"

"You might not remember since it was so long ago," I said. "But we've been together for the past three years. I don't want to marry anybody but him."

"Then tell Auntie and Uncle," she urged. "They'll understand."

"No, they \_won't,\_ " I firmly stated. "Nobody would understand. Mother and Father only care about acquiring more money and influence, don't you know? Brother does whatever he wants and they don't say a thing. But I don't have a voice, Kimiku. I've been trapped here for twenty-one years and treated like a puppet and having my strings fiddled with. I can't do this any longer."

I stood up, brushing the tears from my face as I paced over to the window. Mother and Father were standing underneath the shade of the cherry blossom tree, conversing with Shin with bigger smiles on their faces than they ever had when they were with me. My parents did love me, and I loved them, but the way they showed their love for me was harsh and unbearable. While my brother could stay and go as he pleased, and brought home different women he liked, I was forbidden from meeting any boys or leaving the house without strict supervision by either my brother or my parents.

All of the pain I had felt over the years piled onto me at once. The tears wouldn't stop, no matter how hard I tried to hold them back. Kimiku rushed over to my side, hugging me, her round belly uncomfortably pressing against my own. Not knowing how to respond, she held me like she would a child, except I was taller than her so she had to reach up to stroke my hair. Her efforts to soothe me were in vain, and the more I thought about my impending doom, the more I cried. When my parents and Shin returned to the house, I rushed to my room and Kimiku made an excuse that I was feeling sick and had gone to the bathroom.

I sat down in my bedroom and stared out the window at the forest, remembering how just last night, I had been there with Souji in the shack. I longed to be in his arms once again. The only time I was truly happy was when I was with him. Just doing simple things like talking or even just sitting with him made everything seem like it would get better, when I know it wouldn't. At first my attraction to him had been purely sexual, but eventually I found myself falling deeper and deeper in love with him. Instead of meeting up once every two weeks to make love, we began seeing one another more frequently, sometimes just to converse about everyday things. Gradually we developed a close friendship and began to confide in one another about our experiences.

Now, three years into our relationship, we met three times a week -

on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, we would roam out to our meeting place at eleven at night. I would leave the house and he would steal away from his patrol so we could spend a few hours of our day with one another. In reality, Souji was just as forbidden from seeing anyone as I was. Yet, he always behaved so carefree, so unconcerned that I sometimes forgot that sneaking out to see me was punishable by death.

I moved to sit by the window and gazed longingly out at the forest, wishing Souji would come to my window and whisk me away from this horrid place. Perhaps I really should run away with him, like he had suggested. Maybe one day I should pack up a bag and set up, never to return. The thought of running away appealed to me more and more as I thought about it. I wanted nothing more than to leave this place while I still had the chance to. Once I got married, there was no escape. I would be confined to my husband's home for the rest of my life.

I brushed the tears away from my face as I recalled the previous night. He had recommended running away together, though I knew Souji could not commit to something like that. He loved the Shinsengumi and Isami Kondou far too much to give up his position to be with me. If he didn't run with me, what would I do? I would have to go alone, then, wouldn't I? But where would I go? There was only so far I could travel alone on foot without getting recognized or attacked... or even worse, killed.

I heard my Mother and Father's voices and stole out to the hallway and into the bathroom, where I washed my face, making myself presentable. I emerged as if nothing had even happened, returning to the tea room where everyone was having lunch. Putting on my best smile, I seated myself at the edge of the table. On the bright side, it was only a few hours until I could see him again.

Upon her own request, Kimiku ended up rooming with me and laid a futon beside my own on the floor. Horrified by this turn of events, I played along with it, pretending to be fast asleep in bed when I really was lying there, wide-awake and anxious as I could ever be. As soon as I began to hear her soft snores, I stuffed the pillows underneath the sheets, quietly apologizing to Kimiku as I hoisted myself out the window, sneaking out into the forest as quickly and silently as I could.

I followed the usual path and found the door open slightly, entering and lighting the lamp as I shut the door. Souji smiled from where he sat by the shelf.

"You look happy today," I commented as I walked over to him, taking a seat in front of him.

"I might," he spoke, uncrossing his arms, "but you don't."

"I don't what?"

"You don't look happy."

"Don't be silly," I said, scooting closer to him to stare into his eyes. He chuckled, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me onto his lap. Hugging him around the neck, I planted a feathery kiss to his lips, gasping when he immediately licked me as soon as I

withdrew. "Souji!"

He flicked his tongue over my cheek, grinning when I scolded him for acting in such a manner. I couldn't help but laugh, my heart swelling up with an immeasurable warmth as he affectionately cupped my chin, running his thumb across my cheek. "You smiled."

"Did I?"

Souji must have noticed my slightly swollen eyes because he had attempted to console me, albeit in his own strange way. I smiled gratefully, just for him.

"Thank you, Souji," I murmured.

"For what?" he asked, feigning ignorance. I giggled, unable to hold back my sudden overwhelming happiness. Due to his outwardly rash and violent personality, concealing the selfless heart he had underneath was quite easy. I knew first-hand just how far he was willing to go to prevent anyone from discovering his secret.

A few months after we had started to see one another, I had found out Souji had been sneaking from his duties to play with the children at the temple and had praised him for it. He had become so alarmed by me praising his kind heart that he threatened to kill me if I didn't stop. Even when he drew his sword and brought the tip of the blade to my throat, I failed to be afraid of him, pushing the weapon away and embracing him. I begged for him to share his feelings and burdens with me, wanting to be able to do more for him as someone who genuinely cared for him.

From that point on, we truly began to love one another, flaws and all, though it was difficult to get close to him. He had a habit of pushing people away before they could become too close to him, fearing that he would break their trust or get too attached to them. Countless times I had been pushed away from him - if I tried to console him in difficult times he would accuse me of pitying him, or if I ever showed him too much affection he would think I was faking it. Souji found it difficult to trust and love, and I experienced it first-hand.

It took a full year and a half before he finally told me he had loved me too, after having received silence as a response for so long. The first time he told me he loved me, I had cried so much that he was threatening to kill me if I didn't stop, but I knew he was just kidding from the gentleness in his voice.

However, in spite of all of the ups and downs of our relationship and all of our similarities and differences, the fact we loved one another unconditionally was undeniable. Whenever he would go off on a mission for several weeks or even months, I found it difficult to function, yearning and aching to see him. Whenever he would come back, he would always have something for me to make up for our time apart.

The Souji I knew now was much different from the one from before. Some attributes still remained, though, such as his reluctance to admit he was in actuality, more caring than anyone I had ever known. Even now, his selflessness showed - he had tried to cheer me up when I was down, even when I pretended like I was fine.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em>Mature scene starts here and ends after the break.<em>\*\*

"Souji," I called, caressing his face as I gazed lovingly at him.  
"Tonight, can we...?"

He merely smiled. "We haven't done that for a month already, you know? I was starting to get impatient, wondering when you were going to ask." He loosened the obi holding his coat together, my heart racing in my chest as he shifted our positions, leaning over me as he undid the sash of my kimono.

Though we had done it countless times before, I never failed to get embarrassed about it. As Souji slipped off his top, exposing his toned muscles, I felt heat rush instantly to my face. He scolded me for being so shy, reaching down to gently stroke me underneath my clothing. I gasped, clinging on to his shoulders as he opened my top with his other hand, his lips immediately latching onto the sensitive skin of my neck. I cried out in surprise, my chest rising as he gave me body-numbing pleasure in two different places.

"Hm? Already so wet, Aya-chan," he purred, his fingers diving past my panties and coming in contact with my sensitive bundle of nerves.

"Don't stop," I sighed, my cheeks flushed as he provided me with what I needed most. I ran my hands all over his smooth body, kissing him passionately as he pinched my clitoris, kneading it between his fingers. I bit my lip to suppress the moan threatening to burst from my throat, Souji's teeth sinking into my shoulder as he sucked loudly on the skin.

I breathed in sharply as he impatiently tore my clothing from my body, leaving me nude under him. His mouth attacked my breast, sucking on my already erect nipples, his tongue relentlessly circling around them. He firmly grasped my other in his hand, squeezing and tugging at it, eliciting quiet sighs from deep within my throat. His fingers had not ceased their teasing and were now tracing along my entrance, drawing circular shapes across as I felt myself get wetter by the second.

I moaned when I felt his finger enter me, easily sliding in before coming back out, a second finger accompanying its journey back inside. Overcome by this sudden sensation, I stopped kissing him, tossing my head back onto the ground, my grip tightening on his broad shoulders as he expertly maneuvered his digits in and out, before ultimately adding a third. Now, as he plunged into my entrance, before he withdrew he would curl his fingers, trying to get me to reach my climax as fast as he could. He was doing so at a relentless speed, his fingers gliding in and out and in and out as I pinched my eyes shut, unable to restrain my cries. I had forgotten how good Souji was with hands in the month we had not touched one another.

At last I had released, my fluids covering his hand, Souji bringing his three soaked fingers to his mouth and lapping the evidence of my climax clean off. He then proceeded to slip out of his hakama, his protruding cock coming into my line of sight. He almost immediately

guided his arousal into my awaiting entrance, filling me to the brim instantly. He thrust his hips against mine, hitting deeper and deeper each time.

"Souji!" I exclaimed as he pounded into me, leaning down to bite my neck as he squeezed my ass in his greedy hands. "H-harder..."

He obeyed my every command, picking up his strength and speed, screwing me absolutely senseless. "Ayako," he called as he climaxed inside of me. Panting, he turned me onto my hands and knees, entering into me from behind and draping his body over my own. I clamped a hand over my mouth to hold in my scream as he groaned quietly, moving his hips, his skin smacking against my own.

"Not so loud," he reminded me with a teasing smile, seeing as how I had completely fell apart under his ministrations. I cushioned my head with my arms as I raised my backside at a sharper angle, allowing deeper penetration. I reduced my cries to almost inaudible pants, unable to fathom the amount of pleasure he was giving me.

We made love for another hour before finally retiring for the night, having made up for the month we had remained dormant. Souji dressed himself, then me, patting my head affectionately as he pecked me on the forehead.

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Mature scene ends here<strong>.\_

"I love you," I whispered, bringing him into my arms.

"I love you too, Ayako-chan," he mumbled tiredly, resting his head against my chest. We stayed like that for a while before I decided it was best to bring up my sentiments about running away.

"Souji, I've given it a lot of thought," I mused. "I think I'm going to do as you say and run away from home. I can't take it."

He sat up, stunned. "What?"

"I can't stay at the estate any more," I stated. "My marriage interview is set for a few days from now, on the weekend. I can't go through with this. One way or another, I'm going to end up married to one of the two of them unless I do something about it. There's no other option but to run away."

Souji shook his head at me. "No, you can't. I was kidding about it before. You can't run away from home, Ayako."

"Why not? Do you want me to get married?" I demanded. "If I stay, I'll be trapped for the rest of my life."

"Of course I don't want you marrying someone else," Souji replied. "But running away is too dangerous. You can still convince your parents to give you more time."

"No, Souji. You know how they are. I'll get into some serious trouble if I ever decide to speak up," I said. "I think I'll leave Friday night. So I have today and tomorrow to plan this. I'm leaving regardless of whether you come with me or not."



"I told you not to go," Souji retorted in irritation. "Stay at home."

"Why are you so adamant for me to stay at home?" I inquired, feeling hurt. "You suggested running in the first place. I don't want to be married. I really don't, Souji. I'd rather die than be forced to marry and spend what's left of my life with someone I don't even love. I love you, and I would marry only you."

He studied my heartfelt face for a few seconds before finally giving in, sighing in defeat. "Idiot, don't look at me like I want you to marry another man," he commented. "Do you really think I would let that happen?"

I was confused by his actions. "Then... why?"

"It's too dangerous for you to run off by yourself. I would never let you do that, especially since you can't fight," he sighed, closing his eyes and scratching his head. "Well, it looks like I have no choice, then. I really didn't want to do this, but if it saves you from getting married I'll do it."

I was almost afraid to ask. "Do what?"

He grinned at me, tilting his head to the side. "Kill the fatass and the mommy's boy. That way I can buy you some more time, right?"

I was incredulous. "Souji!"

Holding his hands up in defeat, he reached over to mess with my hair. "I was only joking, Aya-chan, don't get so worked up. Don't worry, I have an idea. For now, just wait. I'll come for you."

Placing all of my trust in him, I held his hands tightly, nodding my head. "I trust you. I'll wait for you."

After that, I returned home, crawling in through my window, landing with a gentle thud on the ground. I removed the pillows from my bed, about to head to sleep when I realized with a start that Kimiku was sitting up in her bed, looking right at me.

"Aya-chan, where have you been?"

### 3. Escape

Author's Note: Yay, chapter three! I'm on a roll, writing three fanfics at the same time. Anyway, I have a website where I post all of my fanfiction, the link is on my profile! So, time to find out what happens when Kimiku catches Ayako sneaking in after going to see Souji!

\* \* \*

><p>Caught completely off-guard, I stared at Kimiku in utter disbelief. I couldn't see clearly, but I knew for a fact that she was sitting up in the darkness, her blanket wrapped around her small shoulders as she waited for my answer. I didn't know how to react, nor what to expect. I loved and trusted Kimiku like she was my older

sister, but I did not know whether or not she would rat me out to my parents. Holding my breath, my body ran cold as I was struck by the fact that after three years of getting away unnoticed, I had finally been discovered.<p>

Debilitated of my ability to breathe, I stammered over my words. "Kimiku... you... how long have you been awake?" I asked.

"For the last three hours," she spoke. I was sleeping when I woke up because of a shadow on the wall and when I opened my eyes, you were leaving through the window. I thought I was dreaming, so I didn't call out to you, but after a while I realized what I saw was real. Where have you been all this time?"

Mentally cursing myself for not being more cautious, I struggled to keep calm. My fear was evident in my voice as I grabbed her hands, begging her not to tell. "Please, Kimiku, don't tell my parents or my brother. If they find out, they'll kill him... or me."

Her gaze did not waver as she stared down at me. "Where were you?"

I hesitated for an instant before whispering, "I went to meet him."

"Your lover?" she asked.

"Yes."

"How long have you been doing this?" she demanded. "Do you know how dangerous it is to sneak out at night like this? You could have been kidnapped or killed!"

I merely nodded my head.

She let out a breath, her eyes finally softening up. "Who is he, Ayako? You still haven't told me."

"Okita Souji," I confessed. "The Captain of the Shinsengumi's First Division."

Her eyes widened in recognition as she recalled that day three years back, when Souji had killed a man who had attacked me and frightened her with his brutality. I could not read her expression as she looked away, removing her hands from mine.

"So it's that man," she said quietly. "Somehow, I had a feeling."

"A feeling?"

She chuckled lightly, meeting my stunned eyes. "Yes. The way you looked at him after he had saved you - you were the most beautiful I had ever seen you before, and when you spoke to him, I was almost jealous. You probably didn't realize it then, but it was as if you were glowing. It's the same look I get from Shin."

I felt the heat rush to my cheeks and covered my mouth with my hand. "Kimiku, you must be joking with me."

"No," she was quick to respond. "I'm \_not\_. You have a strange taste in men, Aya-chan. When we were younger, I remember you having a

fondness for Yamato-kun, the rowdy boy from the Shinozaki household."

Shinozaki Yamato was a boy we had both known in our childhood and our teenage years. Originally he had been the boy my parents anticipated I would marry, being from a wealthy family with a lot of loud and political influence. Yamato was a straightforward boy, who did things not because others told him to, but of his own free will. I took a liking to him because of his earnest nature and fun, easy-going personality. However, several years ago, the Shinozaki family struck rock-bottom and lost most of their land and influence, so they were cast aside by Mother and Father. I never got to say goodbye to Yamato, and neither had I ever seen him again since then.

"He's handsome, I give you that," Kimiku commented. "How did you manage to tame such a man?"

I shook my head. "Understanding that we both had our own strengths and weaknesses, and that we were not without flaws brought us closer together," I said. "It was difficult, but it was worth all of the struggle."

Kimiku sighed, stroking my hair tenderly. "Aya-chan, in a few days you'll be meeting your two potential husbands. I don't want to tell you this, but I have no choice. You have to break it off with him, because if Auntie and Uncle or the Taira or Takahashi family find out you're secretly seeing a Shinsengumi member, your marriage candidates will immediately pull out."

"I don't care," I said. "I could care less whether or not they want me. I refuse to marry either of them."

"You have no choice, Aya-"

"Yes, I do. Good night, Kimiku."

With that, I crawled into bed and went right to sleep, squeezing my eyes shut and placing my faith in Souji. He would come for me in the end, wouldn't he?

\* \* \*

><p>Saturday came and I found myself in my nicest kimono, with my hair pinned up high and my face dolled up with makeup. Mother had forced me out of bed in the wee hours of morning to have my hair done by one of the area's most well-known hairstylist, an old woman with long, raking witch nails and a mean attitude. Perhaps it was too early in the morning, but she snapped at me whenever I would let my head drop, yanking me forcefully back up and digging her razor-sharp nails into my scalp. My eyes watered from the pain, but I did all I could to hold back my tears, because Mother was keenly watching over me from the doorway.<p>

After styling my hair, I had my makeup done by two professionals, who at least were quiet and did not say much unless instructing me to close my eyes or move my face this way or that. However, they smelled strongly of sour vegetables and the stench was almost too much for me to bear. I breathed only through my mouth, hoping they wouldn't notice how disgusted I was when one of them breathed in my face, a putrid odor emitting from her mouth. I nearly gagged had it not been

for the fake cough I managed to pull off, though Mother was glaring at me through the mirror.

After the make-up had been finished, I had been dressed in my nicest, most expensive kimono and ushered quickly to my parents and brother, who judged whether or not I needed to change anything before leaving for the Taira estate. Brother scrutinized the work of the make-up artists, saying it made me look too young, but Father dismissed his comment and rushed me to the carriage waiting outside. I would ride in a carriage with my brother, Minato, while my parents rode separately. I did not like the idea of sitting beside my brother for a full hour's ride, but because I had no voice in the matter, there was nothing I could say or do that would change it.

Before boarding, I glanced back and forth for any sign of Souji. He had promised he would come for me, but here I was, heading to my first marriage interview, and he was nowhere to be seen. I had originally assumed he would come to take me away yesterday night and had lied awake, waiting for him, but just like today, the forest was undisturbed and there was no sign of Souji anywhere. Had he forgotten it was today that I departed?

Minato noticed my hesitation and pushed me up into the carriage impatiently. "Ayako, what are you waiting for? Hurry up."

I got into the carriage and sat on the farthest end, hoping to get as much of a distance from him as I could. To my relief, he also seated himself right against the window, opening the blinds to check up on the status of my parents, who had already been seated. He called out to the driver, who simply nodded his head in understanding, most likely intimidated by Minato's irritation. We set out on the route to the Taira estate, my heart sinking lower and lower as time passed by and there was still no sign of Souji anywhere. Eventually I had concluded he had not forgotten about me, knowing how true he was to his word. Therefore I assumed he could not receive permission leave the Shinsengumi headquarters and was forced to stay behind.

I reluctantly accepted my impending doom and let out a morose sigh, pushing aside the curtain to gaze out at the endless forest, pitying myself for not being born a normal girl. I wept silently, not wanting to draw Minato's attention. If he saw me crying, he would yell at me, and most likely use force to get me to stop. Minato wasn't a cruel man, but he was forceful and did not like it when things did not go his way, likely because he was so accustomed to getting what he wanted his entire life. I disliked him, but I did not hate him. He did questionable things and treated me badly, but I could not hate him, because he did love me, in the strange way he did. Ever since I been born, Minato had taken care of me, though he always outshined me in the eyes of my parents and every one else.

Sneaking a glance over at him, I could see that he appeared to be a bit troubled, as his brows were knit together as he looked outside. I brushed the tears from my face as he opened the front curtain to stare at the driver, seeming to be puzzled.

"This isn't the route to the Taira estate," Minato spoke.

"The original road is blocked. We're taking a detour through the woods. It will be a bit uncomfortable, but it will cut time. We informed your parents of this beforehand," the driver replied and

continued on. Minato was annoyed, but did not object, allowing the carriage through a path in the woods. I was relieved we could finally be away from the harsh heat of the sun, enjoying the forest scenery as we bumped along, Minato having difficulty with adjusting to the change of terrain.

I let out a calming breath and surveyed the dense, quiet forest, noting how little rabbits and chipmunks stared at us in curiosity as we passed through. I excitedly pointed out a group of baby rabbits to Minato, only to be ignored. After fifteen minutes had gone by, the driver took a sudden turn, going into the deeper area of the woods, where the trees grew so close that the light of the sun was obscured by the leaves that were crowded so near to one another. The makeshift roof gave the forest an eerie feel, and I was beginning to sense that something was wrong. Minato was not stupid and had noticed the abrupt change of route, throwing open the curtain in anger.

"Hey, where are you taking us? This is the opposite direction, you imbecile!" Minato demanded. The driver ignored him and continued on with the journey into the darkness, the sound of my parents' yelling alerting us. Minato stuck his head out of the window and looked back, then forward, ordering the driver to stop.

Instead of doing as ordered, the driver cracked his reigns down on the horse, picking up a dangerous speed. I cried out as I bumped my head on the side of the carriage, Minato in a state of panic when he realized my parents' carriage was far behind, having come to a complete stop.

"\_Stop\_! Stop the carriage now, dammit!" Minato hollered as our kidnapper continued galloping on into the darkness. We took a sharp turn, the carriage nearly tipping over as Minato fell onto me, nearly knocking the wind from my body. We rode violently into a secluded area of the forest, far from the main path before suddenly screeching to a halt in a glade.

Dazed, I sat still, recovering from the ride and holding my throbbing head as Minato stood up, throwing open the curtain only to find the driver had since got off of the horse and had disappeared. Bewildered, Minato ordered me to follow him out, yanking my hand as we got off, nearly causing me to fall in the process.

"\_Dammit\_!" Minato cursed, kicking the ground in frustration. "Come out, you bastard! I know you're still here!"

**\*\*Silence\*\*.**

"Mother and Father are still back there," I spoke.

Minato, completely disregarding me, walked towards the bushes. "Show yourself, you coward! Where have you taken us?" he called. "Who paid you to do this?"

Completely stranded in the middle of the forest, and all alone with a potential murderer, we were defenseless, having nothing to protect ourselves with but our own hands and feet. I suddenly saw a bush move beside me and whipped around in alarm. "Here! I saw it move!" I said.

"It was probably just an animal," he retorted. "Now we're going to be

late for your interview. I was hoping you would get married to that guy, too. I'd finally get to have the house to myself. But now that we're late, it's impossible to get an approval from their family. But there's still that alcoholic Takahashi left. He'd do anything for a woman who can take care and cook for his fat self. I still can inherit the property if you go off and marry him."

I was incredulous by Minato's heartless words. "Brother, don't you care at all about my happiness?" I asked. "Don't you even care what I feel?"

"Why should I?" he snapped. "I did once, but that was a long time ago. I'm exhausted from taking care of you. The sooner you leave, the sooner I'll be able to finally get possession of the property. Mother and Father just want money and power from your marriage, don't you know? Don't be so foolish and rely on feelings, Ayako. In a world like this, emotions get you nowhere. But money and power, that's a whole different thing."

I knew it all along that money and power and land were all my family cared for, but it hurt even more to hear it coming from Minato's own mouth. I covered my mouth with my hand as Minato's true intentions came to light. The caring, protective brother I had loved had been replaced long ago by this man, who had been ruined by his insatiable thirst for power.

Suddenly, a figure burst out from the bushes, seizing me by the arms and pulling me into the woods. Before Minato could even react, I was thrown over the man's shoulder and taken hastily away from the scene before Minato could even begin to process what was happening. I was about to scream when a familiar scent greeted me, a scent I could recognize anywhere. Though my captor was wearing a hood, I knew who it was solely from the way he smelled, and my alarm quickly subsided to relief.

"You came," I breathed as he whisked me further and further from the glade. "Souji!"

He looked up at me, his emerald eyes glinting in the dim obscurity. "You thought I forgot about you, didn't I?"

"Maybe," I replied as his running began to slow down. "Scream really loudly so he thinks you're fighting me off."

I did as told, letting out a loud shriek that pierced the serenity of the forest. Souji laughed, coming to a stop at last after our exhilarating escape. He dropped me down onto my feet and smiled at me, removing his hood. I ran into his arms, feeling the ethereal joy of freedom for the first time in my entire life. He caught me around the waist, standing there as I whispered words of relief.

"Thank the heavens it's just you," I mumbled as I held onto him. "You were the driver, weren't you?"

Souji inclined his head. "I stole the original driver's uniform and left him in the bushes by your house. The other driver had no clue where we were headed. He was just following after me. What a fool," he explained in amusement. "Did I scare you?"

"Just a little bit. I think you scared Minato more than anyone else,

though," I confessed.

Souji let out a huff. "He deserved all of that," he answered. "But I needed a witness so I had no choice but to bring him along. Are you injured anywhere? I'll make you feel better."

I pointed to my head. "I hit it on the side of the carriage earlier, and-"

He placed a gentle kiss to my forehead, silencing me instantly. "Better?"

"A lot better."

We took a break by the waterfall, which was a twenty-minute hike from our original location. I refused to let him carry me up and walked side-by-side with him the entire way there, crying out in delight when I finally caught sight of the crashing water ahead of us.

"Amazing!" I sang in wonder, rushing towards the falls. "It's \_gorgeous\_!"

Souji watched as I stopped by the edge, staring into the crystal clear water in awe. I had never seen something so magnificent in my entire life, and stood up to try to see the very top, which lie several dozen feet above us. Souji wrapped his arms around me from behind, burying his face in my neck as he enjoyed the breathtaking view with me.

"My parents used to bring me here when I was young, along with my older sister," Souji said. "I used to swim in here all the time before my parents died."

"It must have been fun," I said, gently touching his hand. "Wasn't it cold?"

"Not to me. I used to swim around butt-naked!" he admit. I pictured a baby Souji jumping into the water in his birthday suit and could not help but laugh.

We spent some time just enjoying the view together before Souji took me down to the city not too far away, where he brought me in to the Shinsengumi's headquarters, walking in with me through the front gate, where two guards stared at me, completely mesmerized. Souji pretended not to notice as he led me through the courtyard, where men dressed in the signature blue haori were busy sparring with one another. They bowed respectfully to Souji as he passed, though their eyes were glued onto me in disbelief. I was beginning to wonder if this was okay and stuck close to Souji, taking a few steps forward so that I was directly behind him.

"Souji, who's the girl?" a boy with brown, tied back hair and youthful features inquired, approaching us. He smiled at me when I looked at him, shyly rubbing the back of his head. "Hello there. I'm Todo Heisuke."

"Hello, I'm-" I managed to reply before Souji placed his arm around him, grinning widely. "Huh?"

"Good to see you too, Heisuke," Souji said, making Heisuke nervous with his wide smile. Heisuke chuckled sheepishly as he backed away, Souji smiling back at me, nodded his head and I followed him up the steps and into the main building. A tea table had been set up, and gathered around it were a few faces I recognized from before - Sano and Shinpachi were there, along with Hijikata and Saitou. Two men I did not recognize were there as well and were stunned to see me come in through the entrance, dressed in my best clothes at that.

Heisuke came into the room after us, sliding the door closed as everyone got silent. Souji pushed me in front of him, urging me to introduce myself to the expectant men. Before we had arrived, he had told me to call myself Shiroyama Aya. I scanned their multitude of expressions as I bowed my head low.

"Hello, my name is Shiroyama Aya, and I-"

"I recognize you," Hijikata cut me off as soon as I raised my head, much to my surprise. "When Souji said he was bringing us back an ally, I did not expect a woman to come walking in."

"I remember you!" Shinpachi burst out, standing up and rushing over to me, grabbing me by my hands and beaming at me. "You're that beautiful girl from back then, aren't you? Remember me? Nagakura Shinpachi?"

I laughed, nodding my head. "I remember you, Nagakura-san."

"Then you probably remember me too, right? I'm Harada Sanosuke," Sano greeted from where he sat.

"Yes."

Shinpachi directed my attention back to him with a shake to my hands. "It's been too long. Aya-chan," he said enthusiastically. "You've gotten even more pretty since the first time I met you."

"Thank you very much for complimenting her," Souji said, casually prying Shinpachi off of me.

"Shiroyama, right?" a man I did not recognize asked me. He had short hair and steep slopes for eyebrows, yet his golden eyes were kind and gentle. "Are you a relative of Shiroyama Takeda?"

"No, she isn't," Souji answered. "She's from the northern Shiroyama clan, the one who has blood from the mainland. Her family has been overrun by rebels and her family has ties with me so I thought it would be a good investment to bring her here."

"So that's how you know her," Hijikata grumbled. "This girl, we've seen her before. Is she really from the north?"

The golden-eyed man nodded his head. "The Shiroyama clan is lesser known, but they do have a wide family line that extends to China. Aya-san, how long have you been here?"

"I've been in and out of Japan for about four years," I said in a slight northern accent. "I just received news of my family's misfortune and informed Souji-san. He told me that because my parents knew his, he could provide a place for me to temporarily stay while



things are settled in the north."

"Actually, we're cousins," Souji suddenly said. "Right, Aya-chan?"

"Yes," I answered, internally alarmed by his new story.

"Oh, great!" Shinpachi chortled. "I was beginning to worry you two were together or something."

"Of course not," Souji replied nonchalantly. "But I forbid any of you from getting any close to her. She's \_delicate\_."

"How old are you?" Heisuke inquired excitedly. "I'm nineteen!"

"I'm twenty," I lied. I was really nearing twenty-two, but saying I was twenty sounded like the better decision.

The casual atmosphere was rattled when a second man I did not recognize crossed his arms over his chest smugly. "\_Hmph\_."

"What is it, Sannan?" Souji queried, a hostile glint in his eye. The man by the name of Sannan stood up, walking over to me and grabbing my face in his hand, tilting my chin up so he could stare into my eyes through his bespectacled ones. He had sharp, inquisitive eyes, endless knowledge seeming to be hidden behind his amber irises. Ignoring Souji's protesting, he smiled at me, releasing me after he had finished examining me.

"She doesn't look very Chinese," Sannan observed, pushing his glasses up.

"I'm only partially Chinese - my grandmother," I explained calmly. Souji angrily wrenched Sannan from me, glaring at him.

"Who gave you permission to touch her?" Souji demanded.

Sannan smiled. "Calm down, Okita-san. She's only your cousin, right? You act like she's more than that."

"Sannan, that's going too far," Heisuke scolded as Souji stared him down. The two looked at one another for a moment before Sannan retreated to his original seat, smiling kindly over me as if nothing had ever even happened in the first place.

"I apologize if I scared you, Shiroyama-san," he said, ignoring Souji's unwavering stare.

"It's fine," I said, though I found myself disliking him from the way he observed me. It was as if he were testing me and keeping track of my every movement. Suddenly feeling greatly uncomfortable, I was relieved when the golden-eyed man stood from his seat, clasping his hands together as if coming to a final decision.

"As Commander of the Shinsengumi, Isami Kondou, I give you permission to stay with us from here on out. I could hardly turn away such a nice young woman, and Souji's cousin at that. I'll prepare a room for you immediately in a separate area from the men's rooms, that way you'll have some more privacy," the man, who identified himself as Kondou, declared.

So this was Isami Kondou, the man I had heard so much about and the only person Souji loved as much as he loved me, if not more than me. I could not help but smile widely at the man, bowing down gratefully.

"No words can express my gratitude," I spoke.

"I knew you would understand," Souji exclaimed in delight. "Kondou-san truly is a saint, isn't he, Aya?"

"Kondou, you're agreeing to this way too easily," Hijikata objected, having kept silent the whole time. "What good would having a woman here do? It'll just bring us all trouble."

"I disagree," Sano spoke. "I think we need a woman around here."

"Yeah, why not?" Shinpachi agreed.

"I bet Aya-san has some secret talent," Heisuke added. "She can probably make herself useful around here, right?"

Souji and I glanced at one another briefly before I inclined my head. "I can fight."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, swords are not for women to play around with," Hijikata said, laughing.

Feeling irritated with him, I grabbed the sword off of Souji's belt and pointed it at him. "I can prove it to you."

"Can you?"

Hijikata eyed me testily for a moment before placing down his cup of tea and nodding his head. I withdrew the sword as he stood up, looking around the room before finally resting his gaze upon Heisuke. "Heisuke can be your partner in this match. Let's bring this out to the courtyard."

Hijikata filed out, followed shortly by Saitou, Sano, Shinpachi, Sannan, Kondou, Souji, then Heisuke. Heisuke glanced at me worriedly, wondering if I was going to be able to handle fighting against a full-fledged samurai. I wondered the same, having never wielded a sword in my life - I had only held and used wooden swords when I practiced on my own, mimicking the maneuvers and stances my brother had learned from his instructor.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Aya-san?" Kondou inquired as I entered the courtyard. "Heisuke is one of our best men."

"You don't have to do this," Souji stated.

I smiled. "I'm not going to win, of course, but I'm going to put up enough of a fight that Hijikata-san will reconsider."

"Aya-chan, I didn't know you knew how to wield a sword," Souji spoke. "Who taught you?"

I stood across from Heisuke, smiling at Souji, who stood on the

sidelines. "I taught myself."

The men who had previously been sparring and practicing had since crowded around in curiosity, seeing as I was holding a razor-sharp blade in my hand. Hijikata, clearly doubting me, hardly even bothered to watch as the fight began. Sano and Shinpachi watched anxiously as Heisuke rushed full-speed at me while everyone else just waited to see how I would handle the first strike. Holding the hilt of the sword with both hands, I waited until the very last second to move from Heisuke's attack range, blocking his sword with mine.

He was much stronger than I was and my arms began to tremble under him. I lowered our swords down, elbowing him in the face and using my leg to swipe him off of his balance. I was partially successful, because he stumbled back, completely stunned as the crowd watching us held onto their seats in tension. I rushed at Heisuke, bringing my sword down just to have him counter my attack, pushing me back. I was beginning to feel the weight of losing when I decided to change tactics, apologizing to him before kneeing him in the stomach, and as he doubled over in pain, I tried to grab the sword in his hands, only to find he fought back, ensuing in a struggle.

He managed to wrestle free of my grip and as a result, I fell onto the ground on my rear end, Souji's sword skidding across the ground before Hijikata's feet. Heisuke, realizing the fight was done with, smiled and offered a hand to me. I gladly took it, dusting myself off as everyone looked expectantly over to Hijikata, who had his arms stubbornly folded across his chest. I could tell that he was still unconvinced, probably having seen how much I struggled when it came to physical strength.

For my first time fighting, I didn't do as badly as I had thought.

"Heisuke, you were going easy on her, weren't you?" Hijikata asked.

Heisuke shook his head. "Actually, I wasn't."

"Not bad," Sano commented, genuinely impressed. "You were struggling a bit but you definitely know how to defend yourself, Aya-san."

"Oh, thank you," I said, rubbing the back of my head meekly as Hijikata cleared his throat.

"Very well. Stay if you like. Just don't get in the way," he declared, walking back into the building. The boys cheered, and Souji, retrieving his weapon, patted me on the back.

"I'm surprised you knew how to use a sword," Souji remarked, still astonished by the show I had put on.

"That was actually the first time I have ever used a real sword and fought someone," I confessed, the boys nearly reeling over in their disbelief. I chuckled. "Sorry for elbowing you and kneeing you, Heisuke."

"It's okay! I'm actually still in shock. I wasn't holding back at all, and it was your first time even fighting," he mused.

"Well, it looks like you've surpassed Toshi's expectations," Kondou said as he joined us. "Let's all have a feast tonight to welcome Aya-san to the Shinsengumi, shall we?"

Nobody raised any objections at the sound of celebration and cheered, wandering off to do their own thing as Sannan and Souji remained with me. Sannan, having kept quiet the whole time, smiled at me, a chill running down my spine as he complimented me on my fighting skills.

"For someone who has never even held a sword, that was quite a feat you've accomplished," he spoke. "Okita-san, you should be a little less concerned about her. She can protect herself if she needs to."

Souji, though hostile, smirked at him. "You're right. She can probably beat up anyone who gets too close to her. Or if she can't, I will."

Sannan was unfazed. "\_Oh\_"

"Aya-chan is all I have," Souji declared. "I'm not letting anyone take advantage of her. That includes you, Sannan."

Sannan, more entertained by Souji's threat than intimidated, laughed. He smiled at me once more before taking his leave, wandering off into the building. Souji glared daggers into his retreating backside until he completely disappeared, then sighed in annoyance.

"That bastard..."

"I think he's suspicious," I stated. "He isn't falling for it as easily as the others are."

Souji huffed. "Then we're just going to have to be extra careful around him," he decided. "Come with me. I'll give you a tour around the place."

End  
file.